

THESE, TOO, WERE UNSHACKLED

15 DRAMATIC STORIES FROM THE PACIFIC GARDEN MISSION

Adapted from the "Unshackled!" Radio Scripts by

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Chapter 15

The Mask - ALBERT NIELSON

ALBERT NIELSON'S face was a granite mask. All during the service he had held his body and his mind taut. He clenched the muscles of his jaw until they ached. He looked down at the tightly clenched fists in his lap, but he did not comprehend that they were his.

The gray casket rolling silently up the center aisle was expensive, but it gave him no comfort. The flowers were beautiful but he did not see them. The entire day and everything in it was unreal, and Nielson wanted to keep it that way. He knew that if the fact of his wife's death should become real in his mind, he might lose the iron grip with which he held himself in check. He would have to face as reality the fact that Mary was gone.

In the chapel, people were getting up and leaving. Some of them glanced at him, but he did not turn his head. He felt a hand touch his arm. "All right, Mr. Nielson. You and I will go on now. The cars are waiting."

"No," Albert Nielson said.

"Take my arm, Mr. Nielson."

"I don't - I don't think - I want to go."

The man in the black suit tugged at his arm. "I'm afraid you must."

"Up to now - it's been - a pageant. No meaning. But this - the grave - it'll be reality."

"I know how you feel. We'll do all we can. Now then-" Nielson looked into the expressionless eyes in a pale, expressionless face above a well-pressed black suit. "No. You don't know how I feel. This is my wife. Do you understand? My wife!"

But there was no refuge from the reality. He understood that at last, as he sat alone that night in his lonely house. The emptiness, the silence, the aloneness - they were all real. Mary was gone.

A neighbor at the back door only intensified his suffering.

She stood there with a plate of cupcakes in her hand, and for one wild moment Albert Nielson thought the woman had lost her mind. Stammering, she told him, "Chocolate cupcakes. With chocolate icing. I know she always made them for you, and I just thought you'd appreciate having some now."

"I see." Perhaps if he gripped the door hard and stood there silently, the clumsy woman would go away.

"Of course, I know perfectly well mine won't be nearly as nice as the ones she always made. But maybe they'll cheer you up a little." Had this woman no respect for human suffering? Cupcakes!

The plate of cupcakes stood untouched on the kitchen table for several days. Finally he remembered to throw them out.

Eventually, of course, he went back to his office. All around him he heard the fatuous voices tell him, "Life must go on . . . You must be brave . . . We understand." They didn't understand. No one who had not suffered like this could understand. And he didn't want the fake sympathy of friends who make a pretense of knowing what agony he was living through.

He held himself rigid against the friends who broke into his solitary brooding in the darkened living room at night. Over the phone came their vapid voices with their uninvolved concern, "You know we're all pulling for you, Albert - you know that, don't you?"

He held them off, hating them. "Yes, John. I know. Thank you."

Then in the background he would hear the homely sounds of a child crying or a wife scolding. The voice again: "I was just telling Myrtle. I said, 'Honey, it's easy to forget other folks when we're so happy ourselves. But we can't forget old Albert. So - uh - I just thought I'd call and let you know we're thinking about you.'"

"That's very good of you," he would say.

"Well, good-bye, Albert. Keep a stiff upper lip, old man." Many evenings, he swaddled the phone in a blanket and listened with grim pleasure as it sobbed itself into silence.

The days dragged on. He broke the routine of earning a living with an occasional visit to a relative when he could no longer postpone it. His visit to his Aunt Elsie, whom he had always considered a religious fanatic, was one which he put off as long as he could. Finally, he was forced to be courteous.

"Albert, listen to me. You're making a dreadful mistake, nursing your grief the way you are. Now you hear your Aunt Elsie. Mary's not dead and gone. Not the way you think."

He braced himself against the religious sentimentality which was sure to follow.

Aunt Elsie went on. "That dear girl's more alive than we are. She's with GOD - for all eternity."

"And I'm alone," Albert said darkly.

"And it's not an easy thing to be alone. I know."

"I wonder if you do." She had irritated him beyond his ability to maintain the facade of politeness.

"I've missed my husband every one of the years he's been with the Lord."

He had forgotten. Of course, she had experienced death too. But so long ago. And could she have felt the same?

"Then how do you stand it?" he asked, relaxing a little.

"That's very simple. I miss him - happily so."

"Happily!"

"Don't you believe that?"

Albert sighed. What good would be gained by hurting this old woman's feelings? "About you, possibly, yes. But it wouldn't do for me. Religion doesn't help me. That's all."

Aunt Elsie smiled wryly. "Religion is just for old women, like me. And for children who don't know any better."

She stopped his protest. "Mary knew better. Albert, the Bible says that '**the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life,**' and '**whosoever believeth in Him (Jesus Christ) ... [shall] have everlasting life.**' Mary is with CHRIST, Albert."

"And I want her here with me!" he stormed. "Listen. I never objected to Mary's beliefs. They were fine, for her. That afternoon when we were first married and she came back from your house and said she was now a Christian - even that was fine with me. Whatever Mary wanted was fine with me. She was all I needed. She's all I need now."

"But you can't . . ."

Albert pounded a clenched fist into his palm. "I know I can't. And I hate GOD for it!" By the time he reached the front door, he had regained his self control, but he left the house vowing to himself that he would not see Aunt Elsie again.

In time, Albert found his house too big and too empty. He sold it and moved to a hotel. If he could narrow the boundaries of his life, he reasoned, there would not be space for loneliness. He laid out his days carefully, trying to fill as much time as possible before he had to go home and face the empty room. For he quickly discovered that one room can be as empty as an entire house.

Still his friends persisted with what he supposed were well-meant attempts to cheer him - "bring him out of himself," as they said. "Thing for you to do, old boy, is travel. Go away. Take a trip. You've got the money. Take some time off and see the world. Meet new people. See new things. Do you good." But by now, his grief was a wall between him and his old friends, and he heard their voices only faintly as they floated over the high, rigid barrier.

Yet in time, Albert did travel. And in his travels he discovered that people everywhere were the same. They were all so insensitive. Wherever he went, people seemed so concerned with their own troubles. Everywhere he met lonely people who were burrowing deeper into their loneliness with the passing of each empty day.

And he didn't care to hear about their empty lives. He didn't want to hear about their burdens. His own was almost more than he could carry. His emotional muscles were stiffening more every day. He was less and less able to flex his sympathies or stretch his concern to include even one other person beside himself. Life, he felt, was nothing but suffering and misery, and undeservedly so. He hated life.

As time went on, he found his circle of acquaintances growing smaller. His work didn't seem as challenging as it once had, so he changed positions. Later on, he moved again, to another job in another city.

In the new firm, Albert Nielson worked closely with an intelligent, efficient woman. She was also attractive, and he found himself asking her to share dinner with him. Admitting to her openly that he was a lonely man, he asked her a second time, and then a third.

But on the fourth occasion, he talked at length about what the last few years had done to him. When they were finishing dessert, Madeline looked across at him quizzically and said, "Poor Albert. Poor, poor Albert."

She set down her coffee cup abruptly. "It really pleases you to have someone's sympathy, doesn't it?"

"Not - particularly." He felt chilly. He had never before noticed what a coldly metallic voice she had. "You can put the knife away, Madeline."

"You do need one, you know. That self-pity of yours is an ugly growth. And it's dangerous. It needs to be cut out."

Over coffee, she dared discuss his tragedy objectively as if it were a new office machine. She was no better than the rest. In fact, she was considerably worse. "It's quite evident you've never suffered," he forced himself to say. "Perhaps you've never loved."

"That might be." She drank her coffee calmly. "But I doubt if a really great love is ever selfish."

"Selfish! Why - I - Mary . . ."

"Yes. Are you weeping for your wife or for yourself? You can't expect other people to sit and hold your hand forever. You're alive, Albert, and in a world with other people who want to stay

alive."

"I'm sorry if I bore you."

She looked back at him levelly. "I'm sure you'll never invite me to dinner again, Albert. And I don't blame you. But someone had to tell you. I think - Mary would tell you if she could. I don't know, Albert, just how one goes about doing it, but you'd better find a way to get rid of self-pity, or you'll find yourself as much alive in the land of the living as a man standing in the snow in the middle of a graveyard on a winter's night!"

For the first time since Mary's death, Albert began to try to face himself. Madeline had been cruel. But alone, he admitted that possibly she might have been right. Bitterness, self-pity, selfishness - the words stabbed away at the wall with which he had surrounded himself.

Before long, he transferred to an office in Chicago. His loneliness went with him. As usual, his hotel room was too empty. He stayed away from it as much as he could, walking the busy streets of the Loop night after night.

As he walked, he brooded.

Madeline and the glimmer of self-realization that followed their encounter had already begun to fade. Perhaps she had been right. But what could he do about it? How could he help himself? Talk and analysis were so easy for those on the other side, the other side of his wall. But he was here alone.

But he could not forget that woman entirely.

One night, as he plodded doggedly along, he found himself repeating the words she had used - "Lonelier than a man standing in the snow in the middle of a graveyard on a winter's night." "What a terrible thought!" he said aloud.

"Did you say something was terrible, sir?"

Startled, he looked up to see a doorman in front of a building. The fellow was grinning. "Most everybody who comes here looks as if things were terrible. But you're the first one I've heard say it."

Albert stopped, out of politeness. "Must have been thinking aloud."

"Care to come inside?"

"Inside? Where?"

The doorman's grin grew wider. "Relax. It's just the old Mission. Can't think of a better place to be when things are terrible. I found out myself. Came in here one night when I knew things were terrible. Now they're fine. I'm a new man with a new life."

Something about the fellow's grinning friendliness put Albert on his guard. "That's very

interesting."

"More than interesting. It's GOD. Come on in."

"What am I supposed to do after I get in there?" Albert asked cautiously.

"Nothing. Just sit down, and let GOD begin to talk to you." Albert looked at him again to see if he were joking, but the doorman's eyes were as candid as his grin. So Albert Nielson stepped into the Pacific Garden Mission.

He endured the meeting, sitting beside a stale-smelling man who was busily engaged at picking at small scabs on the back of his hand. But the speaker, who was the mission superintendent, was intelligent and articulate.

Something he said caught Albert's attention and, when the last hymn was sung, he found himself in the superintendent's office.

Apologizing for being there at all - wasn't this just for the down-and-outers? - he told his story, briefly and without details or drama. Then he said, "Down there tonight, you said, 'Self-pity is a sin . . .'"

The superintendent nodded. "So it is. It's the exact opposite of what we see when we look at JESUS CHRIST hanging on the cross for our sake and in our stead.

Self-pity is one aspect of being self-centered. A life can't be centered on self and on GOD too. I've known Christian believers to block the power of the Cross in their lives through self-pity." The superintendent looked at him candidly. "Are you a Christian believer, Mr. Nielson?"

"No," Albert Nielson told him. "My wife Mary was." His momentary mellowness began to retreat. He wished that he had never become involved in something that was so contrary to his usual remoteness. He had to rebuild the wall between himself and this man's artificial interest. "Don't you think GOD's punished me long enough?" he railed out.

"GOD? Aren't you punishing yourself, Mr. Nielson?" the superintendent responded calmly. "GOD may be using the circumstance to reach you. But punishment, no. We reap results of our own selfish living. Mr. Nielson, sorrow is often very selfish. The temptation of great suffering is toward isolation."

Great suffering? That was what the man was saying. Perhaps he did have comprehension after all. Albert continued to listen.

"A person occupied with his own griefs and refusing to be comforted finds no peace. He's like a dead man among the living."

A man in the snow in the middle of a graveyard on a winter's night!

"You're not the only one . . ."

As if he thought he was! "I know that," Albert snapped.

"People have told me I'm not the only man who ever lost his wife until I'm sick of hearing it."

"That's a sore spot, isn't it? Would you like to lose it?"

What kind of sympathetic understanding was this? "Do you think I want to be unhappy?"

"A person could," the superintendent told him frankly. "A defeated, self-centered, self-pitying person is a stubborn hold-out against the highest good GOD has for him. And that's an expression of sin - subtler than some, but no less real."

"Sin?" This was cruelty more harsh than Madeline's. "Yes, sin. Refusal to come to terms with GOD."

Albert Nielson sat there quietly for what was probably not more than a minute or two. But it was long enough for him to make the gesture that would begin to topple down the wall he had built between himself and people, between himself and GOD. "I think I see what you mean," he said finally.

"Still want to be a hold-out?"

"You mean, a sinner?" Albert said hesitantly. The wall was beginning to waver. "I think - I don't want to grieve any more."

The superintendent reached his hand toward the Bible on his desk. "CHRIST is our Victor. Receive Him, and you receive forgiveness. **If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed!**"

"I hardly know - how to begin," Albert said with trembling lips that no longer seemed to have their old power of rigidity.

"You've already begun, friend. You began when you faced the fact that you were a sinner - and a rebel against GOD; that your grief was self-centeredness."

"Do I pray?" Albert asked simply.

"Do you want to?"

It was the last thrust against the high wall. Albert Nielson had already reached out to GOD, and now, with a mighty effort, he reached out to another human being. "Yes, if you'll help me."

The wall was down. Albert Nielson had begun to live a life that was victorious in the knowledge that he had been a slave of sin of his own making and now he was free. The joyousness of his sudden release affected and changed everything in his life. Eventually he gave up his old job to spend his time and himself in GOD's service.

In the power of JESUS CHRIST, he reached out to others. The sorrows he knew were the sorrows of other men and women. For he had learned one of the greatest lessons of the Christian faith that a time of grief doesn't need to be an end. It can be a beginning.

END OF BOOK